

The Afropolitans

"Flow," the Studio Museum in Harlem's recent roundup of African-born emerging artists, explored what it means to be an "African of the world."

BY SARAH VALDEZ

Thanks to three revelatory surveys of emerging artists in this new millennium—"Free-style" (2001), "Frequency" (2006) and now "Flow" (2008)—the Studio Museum in Harlem has carved out its place as one of the essential venues that give the art world a much-needed dose of diversity. Unlike those first two influential shows, however, which concentrated on work by African-Americans, "Flow" takes stock of an international crew of 20 artists with African roots (19 were born in Africa, and one has parents who were born there); all are age 40 or younger, and most have relocated, primarily to the U.S. and Europe. Studio Museum associate curator Christine Y. Kim organized the show, after having observed that a number of artists under consideration for inclusion in "Frequency" had listed multiple nations—beginning with those in Africa—as their place of "origin." Indeed, when I viewed the

understated but uncommonly insightful new exhibition (which should by no means be mistaken for a show of contemporary African art), the word that came to mind for me wasn't "flow" so much as the Sanskrit term *sunyata*: the profound characteristic of flux and the interdependence of all things.

Keenly aware of interconnectivity, for instance, is South African-born Moshekwa Langa, who divides his time between Amsterdam and Paris. Langa creates free-association "maps" like *Cosmic Revolutions with Scientific Elements* (2005), a mostly green, blue and red collage on paper made with acrylic, lacquer, thread, pebbles and india ink. Acrylic lines run between the names of people and chemical elements—Kate to tungsten, Silas to uranium—yielding a messy version of a Mark Lombardi drawing. Connections emerge and disappear amid the various materials, seeming to represent a con-

tingent rather than an absolute reality: things take on meaning only as they relate to one another.

Also fascinated by interconnectivity, specifically as it pertains to people and information, is Mounir Fatmi, who was born in Morocco and lives in Paris. His essentially monochrome *Bas-Relief (People know, people don't know)*, 2007, was one of the most visually arresting works in the show. I enjoyed imagining this elegant, muted, horizontally oriented abstract composition as a riff on Kazimir Malevich's radical Suprematist painting *White on White* (1918), which the Russian artist boldly intended to transcend all external reality. Fatmi's exercise in variations on pallid hues (forming a verse from the Koran in Arabic script, according to a wall text) involves pieces of coaxial cable covered in beige plastic—some long, some short, nesting next to one another in optically pleasing formations—twisting



Latifa Echakhch: *Erratum* (detail), 2004, broken tea glasses, dimension variable.

across a cream-colored board. Antiseptic-white cable brackets affix the pieces to the board with one silver nail apiece, resulting in a fetching pattern of silver dots. Next to this piece, Fatmi presented a small graphite drawing on paper, *Destinations* (1999-2004), which shows a figure in profile with a swarm of arrows, perhaps symbolizing a flow of energy or information, emanating from and returning to it. In another work, a set of horse-jumping gates more than 5 feet tall, Fatmi poignantly references the hurdles most immigrants face when trying to adapt to life in a strange new land.

Similarly affecting and droll is Latifa Echakhch's *Erratum* (2004), a heap of multicolored shards of tea glasses from her native Morocco left on the floor next to the dinged-up gallery wall against which the Paris- and Martigny-based artist had hurled some of them (others were smashed off-site and placed here). One could compare the gesture of Echakhch's making of *Erratum* to Richard Serra's notoriously macho performance of flinging molten lead at a gallery wall. But the sheer energy evidenced by the dents Echakhch left, along with the act's implied annihilating sentiment (one can only wonder at her

reasons for throwing vessels from her native country at the walls of a cultural institution), holds a fascination beyond the artwork's formal qualities alone.

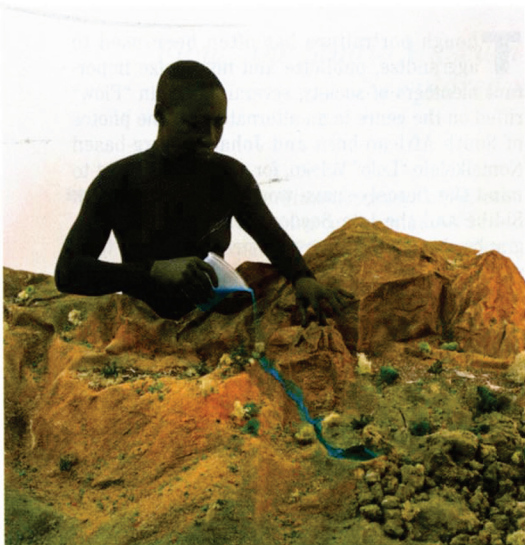
Beauty, impermanence and destructive forces also unite in Otobong Nkanga's visually seductive "Alterscape Stories" series (2006). In both a large-scale C-print diptych and triptych, the artist is seen manipulating a diorama that she built to represent a rocky, arid, starkly gorgeous landscape. Standing behind this jagged model, Nkanga (a Nigerian-born artist who lives and works in Paris and Amsterdam) matter-of-factly pours a toxic-looking Windex-blue liquid onto the miniature landscape, making a jarring spectacle out of that inconvenient truth: toxic human waste imperils the Earth. Nkanga also showed several works on paper made with watercolor, ink and acrylic in a cartoonish graphic style reminiscent of Laylah Ali. *House Boy* (2004), for example, features body parts that include four spindly arms bearing a watering bucket, a trowel, pruning shears and a palm frond. Like Fatmi, Nkanga is one of several artists in "Flow" who was represented by dissimilar examples of work, giving a satisfyingly broad sense of their output.

Though portraiture has often been used to aggrandize, publicize and historicize important members of society, several artists in "Flow" riffed on the genre in an alternate way. The photos of South African-born and Johannesburg-based Nontsikelelo "Lolo" Veleko, for example, brought to mind the fiercely suave work of Malians Malick Sidibé and the late Seydou Keita, whose photographs chronicle ordinary yet striking-looking individuals in their communities. Veleko offered up several pigment-print portraits of flossy "Jozi" youth, including one dapper young man who pairs yellow-and-blue plaid pants with a turquoise paisley shirt and red knit cap. Certain of Veleko's male subjects sport skirts; one wears a dashing getup of a suit with pink and orange flowers, a shirt with pale pink and magenta flowers, and a blood-red velvet armband—with a pair of aviator shades added for good measure. A girl complements her white mesh shirt with a quirky but adorable cutoff-denim vest, miniskirt and matching legwarmers.

That all is not dire in Africa becomes abundantly apparent in Veleko's images, a point further sharpened by London-born and -based Lynette Yia-



Mounir Fatmi: Bas-Relief (People know, people don't know), 2007, coaxial antenna cable and staples on wood panel, 59 by 96 inches. Courtesy Lombard-Freid Projects.



Otobong Nkanga: Alterscape Stories: Spilling Waste (detail), 2006, C-print, 39 3/4 inches square.



Mustafa Maluka: I can't believe you think that of me, 2007, acrylic and oil on canvas, 72 by 52 inches. Private collection. Courtesy Galerie Bertrand & Gruner, Geneva.



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Pelt, 2006, oil on linen, 55 by 47 inches. Private collection. Courtesy ARQUEBUSE, Geneva.

Though portraiture has often been used to aggrandize, publicize and historicize important figures, several artists in “Flow” riffed on the genre by depicting fictional people.

dom-Boakye. Of Ghanaian descent, Yiadom-Boakye responded to the Studio Museum's invitation to the artists in the show to create a new word using the prefix “Afri” for the spring issue of the institution's magazine by inventing the following neologism:

Afri-day Life: Kids going to school, parents going to work, friends eating out, students graduating from university, surgeons saving lives, women doing business, advancement, invention, romance and all the other good stuff that happens everyday across Africa but goes largely unreported in the “developed” world. synonym: hope antonym: disaster porn

Yiadom-Boakye also showed several mesmerizing oil-on-linen paintings of fictional black people, works inspired by Goya's dark-hued palette as well as Manet's painterly, sumptuous treatment of detail in his well-styled portraits of the wealthy. Taking its cues from yet more art-historical favorites (Leonardo's *Lady with an Ermine* and John

Singer Sargent's *Madame X*) is one agreeably distorted, gracefully executed image of a dark-skinned woman in a black dress with a plunging neckline, its fabric blending into the black background. The painting's overall darkness contrasts with the white of the woman's teeth and slightly asymmetrical eyes. A pointy-nosed, long-bodied, furry creature lies draped over her shoulder. Titled simply *Pelt* (2006), the image has much visual appeal, not to mention a wry humor. Yiadom-Boakye shows more interest in manipulating paint into a pleasing image—skewing scale, distorting features and generally making delightful mischief with the idea of portraiture—than in making a convincing “likeness.”

More crisply rendered and color driven, while also representing fictional subjects, Mustafa Maluka's exquisite large-scale paintings depict people the artist describes as “migrants.” Composed of elements appropriated from American and European pop culture and fashion magazines that filter into Cape Town—where the Berlin-based artist grew up—Maluka's figures wear beautifully designed, richly patterned clothing and meet the viewer's gaze with wide eyes, strong bone structure and skin of indeterminate race. The subjects' generally expressionless faces are belied by Maluka's psychologically charged titles, such as *I can't believe you think that of me* (2007); *I'm not going anywhere, this is home* (2006); *The room is spinning and I can't breathe* (2005); and *They pray for my downfall* (2005).

Trokon Nagbe, born in Liberia and now living in Brooklyn, brought a highly personal yet broadly

relevant installation to “Flow,” bearing the discursive title *I have two reactions to power: 1. To run and pretend the rules don't apply to me 2. Secretly hope for its destruction* (2008). In the upper section of a sizable piece of board, Nagbe positioned an abstract rendering—in gold-flecked black and white that looks something like zebra hide—of a news photo of the misguided “shock and awe” campaign against Baghdad in 2003. In the board's lower half, on a background of gold leaf, is a lovingly detailed painting of a peaceful Monrovia neighborhood with palm trees, laundry hung out to dry, makeshift homes and off-kilter telephone poles. A few feet in front of the board, an orange knit cape hung from the ceiling like a hot-hued ghost. Nails stuck through the yarn point mostly inward, as though any protection the garment might afford would be more threatening to the person wearing it than to anyone else.

Each artist in “Flow” maintains a complex—and pointedly intimate rather than merely cerebral—engagement with identity, ostensibly as a result of having learned to adapt to multiple and, more often than not, radically different environments. In a world of conflicting absolutist ideas, theirs is a perfect model to follow. □

“Flow” was on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem [Apr. 2-June 29, 2008]. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue that includes essays on each of the 20 artists, as well as African politics and the contemporary international art world.

Author: Sarah Valdez is the editor at the New Museum in New York.